No. 2

The REDEMPTION of Marie Gordon

THE TRAGIC STORY OF WRONGED WOMANHOOD

Price 10¢

"Mrs. Gordon is very ill," she said. "I am sorry, but Mr. Gordon has given instructions not to admit any visitors."

R. of M. G., No. 2.

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RETREATING until she was flattened against the wall, Marie Gordon stood waiting. One of her hands was pressed to her frantically beating heart. The other was raised as if to ward off the blow she fully expected. For Phil seemed to have suddenly been transformed into a maniacal brute. But the blow did not fall. Nothing could have been farther from Gordon's mind than the thought of striking his wife. His extremely menacing attitude was the recoil of the frightful mental shock just received.

The picture in his hand revealed his wife—the mother of his children,. in the arms of Jack Hoover. And the scene was unmistakably the veranda which partly encircled the Madison Country Club house.

"Well, suppose you explain this!" he said, holding up the damning evidence. His voice was low and menacing. "Explain if you can!"

No answer came. Marie was trapped. Her mind raced madly, but with sickening sureness came the conviction that the thing could never be satisfactorily explained to her husband. Oh, if she only had not lied. If she only had not assured Phil that Jack Hoover had never touched her.

"I—I am waiting!" Phil glowered, the breath whistling through his teeth.

"Phil," she began, her hands and eyes eloquent, "I—I can't. You—you would not believe me if I told you just what——"

"Of course I wouldn't!" Gordon interrupted fiercely. "You couldn't expect me to believe a miserable liar like you, and a deceitful wretch like you. And you can't explain without revealing how utterly unfit you are to be the mother of those innocent tots upstairs. Oh, I might have expected it," he went on bitterly. "I might have expected it. I am really surprised that you remained decent as long as you did."

She made a gesture to silence him—a gesture of protest, but he ignored it. His voice like rumbling thunder, he went on:

"More than once I was warned that sooner or later the tainted blood of the Careys must come to the surface. Well, it did. And what a fine partner you'll make for that rotten sister of yours. Oh, yes, you needn't shrink. The world knows what sort of a woman Julia Carey, the actress is!"

For a moment resentment flashed up in Marie's eyes. The ugly rumors about her sister were untrue. But it was worse than useless to argue that question with Phil in his present mood.

Gordon wheeled suddenly and threw the picture on the table, then faced the cowering woman again.

"Alright!" he shouted as Marie remained silent. "It is not really necessary for you to explain this thing. But I want to tell you that this is the end. I'll divorce you—yes, I will. I've got the goods on you now. And, if you ever touch the children again with your filthy hands, I'll kill you!"

Marie darted forward and clutched his arm.

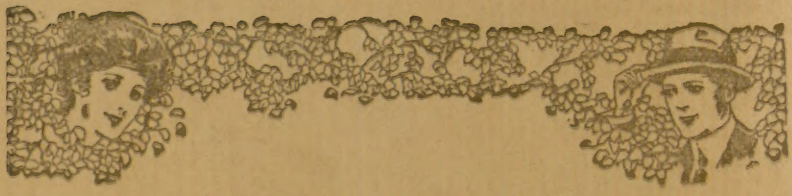
"No—no!" she shrieked. "Not that, Phil. Anything but that! I am innocent, I swear it. I'll explain everything—only give me a chance!"

He shook her off brutally.

"Listen to me, dear!" she begged, her voice shrill with excitement. "You must listen!"

"Not another word!" her husband thundered. "Get out of my sight instantly, and out of my house within an hour. If you don't, I will not be responsible for what happens!"

A pitiful wail escaped Marie's lips. She swayed for a few seconds, and then with a low sob, collapsed in a heap on the floor.



Chapter 6

FATHER AND DAUGHTER

AN AIR of mystery existed about Jack Hoover. He never spoke about his family connections. He had no visible means of support. He was not engaged in any sort of business. Neither was he a professional man. But he was always supplied with plenty of money. And he was a fellow who made friends with amazing rapidity. One thing, however, must appear significant. He rarely remained in the same city longer than two years.

Upon his arrival in Chicago, six months ago, he leaped into social prominence almost instantly. He rented an apartment in one of the most exclusive family hotels. He dressed with utmost taste, and the monocle he wore gave him the air of a foreign nobleman.

He was a past master at repartee. Conversation never lagged when he was in a crowd. He was well versed in literature, loved good opera, played golf splendidly, and danced divinely. He was a lover of all outdoor and indoor sports.

No one had the least suspicion that Hoover was a shrewd social parasite who lived by his wits. There was nothing crude about his work. Women admired his audacity and applauded his nerve. He went by the assumption that the average woman quickly forgives an affront if sweetened by a subtle compliment. In short, Jack Hoover thoroughly understood women.

The men of the fast social set proclaimed him a good sport. He entertained them lavishly at his apartment, and never forgot his smile if he lost heavily in a game of draw poker.

When a woman of the social set was discussed, Hoover never participated. He was a good listener, and while he listened attentively, he usually got the information he needed.

His Japanese valet was a suave little chap, who dispensed the best cigars, as well as favorite drinks, without urging from his master.

The city of his latest exploits had been Philadelphia. With him came an undersized chap by the name of Jones. Jones had

at one time been connected with the photographic staff of a New York paper. And he was considered a genius in quick development of pictures.

When Jack Hoover and Jones joined hands in an enterprise that promised instant success, they were astounded with the results.

Jack Hoover always managed to get the entree into the most exclusive society circles. His part of the work was to trick the wife of some rich broker or business man into a very compromising position in the dark .

Jones, hidden with his camera nearby, would take a flashlight picture of the couple when in an embrace. As a rule the woman quickly paid the price demanded of her, rather than risk a scandal or a possible divorce.

Of course, Jack Hoover had nothing to do with this part of the work. His profuse apologies, if they were needed, disarmed suspicion. He did not know the scoundrel who had taken the picture. Oh, no! In fact he threatened in every case to leave no stone unturned to find the miscreant, the miserable blackmailer, thrash him soundly, and then hand him over to the police.

At the very beginning of Hoover's exploitations in Chicago, he found an enthusiastic admirer in Alice Procter. He was attracted to her by her queenly beauty, her obvious wealth and social rank.

But what really drew them together was a kindred spirit. Hoover was highly pleased when Alice invited him to take dinner one evening at her home.

"I want you to meet my father and younger sister," she told him.

The dinner proved to be a somewhat disagreeable affair for Jack. Unfortunate for him, old Mr. Procter was too keen a judge of men and human nature in general. Hoover was at once labeled as an undesirable.

"Don't you ever invite that fellow again," Alice's father growled after Hoover had gone.

"Don't you worry about that," she replied angrily. "You made it very plain to him that he is not wanted here. Mr. Hoover is too much of a gentleman to——"

"Gentleman?" the father exclaimed irascibly. "He looks like

some sort of a smooth adventurer to me."

"Oh, you make me sick," the girl snapped with a contemptuous shrug of her shoulders. "Just because he doesn't agree with your old fogy ideas you call him a crook."

That was the beginning of a serious breach between father and daughter. It was widened by Alice's absolute refusal to break with Jack Hoover. Then there was another thorn in her side in the person of her younger sister Betty, recently graduated from Vassar.

Betty was a charming girl with sufficient beauty to urge a second look. Moreover, she was the apple of her father's eye. And she loved her dad with a devotion not often seen in daughters these days.

In character she was the direct opposite of her sister Alice. She was sweet and demure. She did not care for social frivolities. While Alice attended some society function, Betty would remain at home with her father. She read to him, played his favorite selections on the piano, and in general made his declining years as pleasant as possible.

Quite frequently Mr. Procter held Betty up as an example of what a girl should be, to her sister.

Alice was sick of hearing Betty lauded to the skies, while she received nothing but criticism. The feeling of resentment already deeply imbedded in her heart, grew to bitter hatred.

On the evening of one of the dances at the Madison Country Club, matters reached a climax. The trouble started as they were eating dinner.

"I wish you would not go to that dance," Mr. Procter began in a mild tone. "Since you got into that country club crowd, you are running away with yourself, Alice. What does it bring you?"

"A lot of fun, old dear," she replied flippantly.

"To what will it lead eventually?" the father asked, his brows raised.

"Oh, I'll probably pick up a rich man, marry him, and settle down," was the quick retort. "That is what you want me to do, don't you, dad? You and Betty don't seem to need me here. I am so superfluous."

The old gentleman's brows clouded.

"It is not a question whether we need you or not, Alice," he

said. "It is a question of your future welfare. You are not likely to pick up a rich husband that way. A man looking for a wife usually finds her in the home where she belongs. He don't, as a rule, select a cigarette smoking frivolous creature who——"

"Spare me, dad," Alice broke in impatiently. "I never did enjoy your old-fashioned sermons. Preach them to Betty."

"Betty don't need them," the father returned, his voice rising with anger. "I wish you were a little more like her. She is the kind of a girl some good man will be proud to call his wife some day. I will never have reasons to be ashamed of her."

"Have you any reasons to be ashamed of me?" Alice cried shrilly, her eyes flashing.

"I have," came back with slow deliberation. "I have heard enough about the way you carry on at those country club dances. You drink like all the rest. You smoke cigarettes. Your conduct is that of a loose woman. And I want it stopped."

Alice seemed about to make a vehement retort, but she evidently thought better of it and remained silent. Her father went on a little less severely:

"No man looking for a life companion wants to marry a girl like you, Alice. You ought to know that by this time. There was Philip Gordon, for instance——" she winced at the mentioning of the name. "I suppose he liked you well enough as a dance partner. But he married Marie Carey. Why? I'll tell you. Marie was a gentle, demure girl just like our Betty."

Alice shot a venomous glance at her younger sister, who sat on the other side of the table with downcast eyes and close to tears. These quarrels between Alice and her father made her very unhappy.

"Please, dad," she said with an expression of mute appeal in her lovely eyes, "don't say any more."

"Oh, let him rave on!" Alice snapped. "I am getting quite used to it."

"Hush, Alice, please, hush," Betty begged.

"Philip Gordon was the kind of a man I like," Mr. Procter continued, ignoring Alice's taunt. "He stands head and shoulder above the rank and file of our present-day jazz hounds. His business is an immense success because he takes care of it. He has neither the time nor the inclination to attend country club dances.

Ah," he ended with a sigh, "what a son he would have made."

Alice tossed her head spitefully.

"Well," she exclaimed with an air of thinly veiled indifference, "letting Phil Gordon slip was my bad luck. But there are others just as good. In the meantime, don't lose any sleep on my account, dad. I'll take care of myself at any stage of the game. And I might still marry Phil some day. Who knows."

With these prophetic words Alice rose from the table and swept from the room. The look on her face was not good to see. She hated her father for constantly preaching to her about her follies and Betty's virtues.

But of her two close relatives she hated Betty most.

"I'd like to take her down a peg in his estimation," she muttered fiercely as she ran up to her boudoir and began to dress for the country club dance. "And I'll do it, if I ever get the chance. She makes me sick with her goody-goody airs."

An ugly smile played about her sensuous lips as she added: "If I can get her and Jack Hoover together some night—well, we shall see."

The plan which began to form in her mind was not that of a loving sister. It was not even that of a self-respecting woman. It was that of an evil-minded female seeking the moral destruction of one of her own sex.

Alice Procter could not entirely succeed in disguising the fact that she was a thoroughly discontented woman.

All of her unhappiness was one of her own making, however. When a woman is disappointed in love, she rarely gets over it. There was a time when she thought life would not be worth living without Philip Gordon.

That she lost him, was her own fault. She knew that—bitter though the truth was. But it almost killed her when someone spoke of it in terms of reproach. Her father had done that very thing.

She still loved Philip Gordon. When she compared him with all the other men of her social set, they faded away. It was as her father had said; he stood head and shoulder above the rank and file of the present-day jazz hounds.

The term brought a smile to her lips.

"I am sick and tired of it all," she muttered, giving way to a

sudden burst of angry emotion. "They say that every dog has his day, I suppose I had mine. But there is another one coming, and when it does—when it does——" she hastily brushed away a tear and smiled again.

Alice had become a desperate woman—ready to do desperate things.

Chapter 7

THE TRAP

JACK HOOVER had just purchased a new car. It was a Packard sport model of the latest make, and he took a great deal of pride in showing it to his friends. He had gambled a bit in stocks, he explained, and cleaned up handsomely. No one doubted it, for he quite frequently was heard discussing stock market quotations. However, there was one person who felt inclined to question Hoover's statement, and that person was Alice Procter.

Alice was more interested in the purchase of the car, than most people of her social set suspected. In fact, she was anxious to have a ride in it. And when Alice wanted something real bad, she made it known.

Hoover was pleasantly surprised, when he answered the phone one evening, to hear Miss Procter's voice.

"I am in a reckless mood to-night, Jack," she told him. "Just had another battle with father. I want to get out. If you don't come and get me, I don't know what will happen."

"How soon can you be ready?" Hoover asked promptly.

"I am ready now," Alice answered.

"Be there in fifteen minutes, Alice."

The latter hung up the receiver and smiled. It was a very shrewd smile. She was not in a reckless mood, and neither had

she quarreled with her father. Never had her mental attitude been more cold and calculating.

Jack Hoover arrived, happy and expectant. It was the first time that Miss Procter had deliberately asked him to take her out. And he liked women in a reckless mood.

"Well, where do you want to go?" he asked as he assisted Alice into the car. "Got any place in mind?"

Alice had not. She said:

"Anywhere where there is music and dancing. And I am dying for a drink. Give me a cigarette."

Hoover passed his case over to her. The girl lit a cigarette. He did the same. Of course, he knew the kind of a place that would suit Alice. It was a roadhouse outside of Chicago which was patronized frequently by the fast set. He had been there before, and so had Alice.

He drove leisurely while they chatted about things in general. They found the roadhouse fairly crowded. A negro jazz orchestra did its best to comply with the continued requests for encores.

"Can you get us a table?" Hoover asked the head waiter.

"Sorry, sir," that individual answered with an ingratiating smile. "We are all filled up. But, wait a moment." It was the same old gag Hoover had heard before. A dollar bill did the work. "I think I can find one for you, sir. Please step this way."

As Alice Procter took off her wrap and sank into a chair, her escort emitted a gasp of admiration.

"By jove, you look wonderful to-night," he murmured, his eyes running over the girl's queenly figure.

It was true, only the adjective used did not do her justice. Alice Procter looked radiantly beautiful. She had come dressed for the occasion. Her dark eyes were smoldering pools of loveliness. Her cheeks were flushed, and her superb white shoulders gleamed in the light.

"Thank you for the compliment, old dear," she said. "Now give me another cigarette and buy me a drink."

Both were forthcoming immediately. Then they danced. There were more drinks and more dances. Hoover held the girl very close, and she smiled up at him. It was a smile of encouragement.

"What do you say to a nice little dinner," he suggested as they sat down to rest for a few minutes. "They have several private dining rooms upstairs. We would be undisturbed and——"

"Yes?" Alice raised her brows questioningly. "Well, I don't mind. I am really outrageously hungry."

The dinner was ordered. They had another dance and then the waiter came to announce that everything was in readiness on the second floor. Alice leaned rather heavily on her escort's arm as he led her up the stairs. And she did not object when he caressed her bare shoulder as they seated themselves.

"You know," he cried exultantly, "it is good to have you all to myself, Alice. You have so many admirers that I——"

"Now behave, Jack," she interrupted. "Don't make any reckless speeches."

Jack did behave because the girl's attitude forbade any further attempt at intimacy. And yet, her eyes seemed to lure him on. He found her an irresistible woman. She was cold and reserved one moment, and almost boisterously gay the next. She was an enigma.

While they ate they talked about their mutual friends, the last country club dance, and society doings in general. Then the waiter came and presented the check.

Hoover drew out a well-filled wallet, and tossed a one hundred dollar bill on the table. Alice gasped.

"Is that the smallest you have?" she cried as she picked up the bill and scrutinized it closely for a moment.

"We can change it," the waiter said obligingly.

She handed the bill to him.

When the change was brought, Jack Hoover wanted to return to the dance floor. Alice vetoed the idea.

"No, I would rather stay up here and continue our chat," she told him. "You said a moment ago you were glad to have me all to yourself. You meant that, didn't you, Jack?"

"Indeed, I did," he retorted quickly.

The conversation was renewed. But the subject Alice chose for discussion bored Hoover. It vexed him not a little when she suddenly grew inquisitive. And then came an unexpected shock. She asked him point blank where he got that hundred dollar bill.

"Drew it out of the bank," he replied, visibly annoyed.

"Oh, did you?" Her laugh had an unpleasant ring. "Are you quite sure about that? The last time I saw that bill it was in the hands of a man by the name of Jones. Perhaps you know him. He makes such wonderful flashlight pictures."

She was not in a reckless mood, and neither had she quarreled with her father. Never had her mental attitude been more cold and calculating.

Jack Hoover was in the act of screwing a cigarette into his long holder, and he dropped them both. He sat staring at the girl

for a few seconds, then tried to cover up his utter confusion by swearing softly at his clumsiness.

"Yes, it was clumsy," Alice agreed, enjoying the man's evident discomfiture. "Now, when you get over your surprise, tell me what you know about this man Jones."

"Never heard of him," he declared with a vehemence which belied the words. "Never heard of him, Alice. You are——"

She held up a hand.

"Not so loud," she warned quietly. "You can't tell who might be listening in the next room. I don't want them to know that the dashing Jack Hoover is just a common swindler—a blackmailer."

"I am nothing of the kind!" Hoover flared up, pale to his lips. "And you can't prove——"

Alice silenced him with a gesture.

"Jack," she said, leaning over the table, "I suppose it must hurt you dreadfully to admit that you have been trapped by a woman. But admit it, you must." And she told him plainly all she knew, and some of the things she had shrewdly guessed. "Every bill handed to your accomplice, Jones, I marked. The one you gave to the waiter was one of them. Now don't try to bluff it out. How many other women did you victimize besides Marie Gordon?"

The man sat utterly crushed. He glanced toward the door as if contemplating instant flight.

"Of course, I have no intention of handing you over to the police," Alice went on reassuringly. "And I don't want you to leave Chicago just yet. You see," she added with a short, ugly laugh, "I may need you, I am sure you would not refuse to do me a little favor if I asked, for keeping silent about your cunning blackmailing scheme."

"I'd do anything for you, Alice," Hoover declared, completely cowed. "I know when I am licked."

Miss Procter nodded and leaned back in her chair.

"It might interest you to know that I have the picture and the plate Jones turned over to us for that five thousand," she said. "And I am going to put you to a test, I want to know how game you are. The picture has been mailed to Philip Gordon. What the consequences will be, I don't know. But unless I miss my guess,

there'll be a divorce."

Hoover gasped.

"You—you don't mean to get Marie Gordon into a mess like that, do you?" he quavered. "I thought you were her friend. You loaned her the money to pay Jones, and——"

Alice Procter's eyes flashed.

"I did!" she broke in with a shrill cry. "But I have no love for her. I wanted that picture and the plate. If it had not been for her, I'd be Phil Gordon's wife."

And then Jack Hoover suddenly saw a great light. Alice Procter had loved Philip Gordon. She still loved him. She had never forgiven Marie for taking him away from her. Her opportunity to wreak a terrible revenge had come, and she meant to make the best of it.

"Alice," he declared, squaring his shoulders, "whatever I may be, I am not a coward. I'll stand my ground, no matter what happens. I owe you a great deal for keeping me out of jail. I am ready to help you still further in that direction. I might call on Marie Gordon a few times during the day, and make it appear that——"

"Don't do that," the girl broke in. "I'll take care of the Gordons. I need your help in another matter."

With her eyes gleaming with bitter resentment and hatred, Alice Procter unbosomed herself. She spoke feelingly about her constant humiliations at home, and the frequent quarrels with her father. And she denounced her younger sister as a base hypocrite.

"The old fool has an idea that Betty is an angel," she went on venomously. "I want him to be brought to the realization that she is just ordinary flesh and blood like I am. Get me, Jack?"

The latter nodded and grinned wickedly.

"I get you," he said. "You can count on me."

Chapter 8

A CHILD'S HEART

OMEN often fancy themselves in love when they are not. The occupation of intrigue, the natural leaning to the pleasure of being loved, and the pain of refusing, persuade them that they feel the passion of love, when in reality they feel nothing but coquetry. Thus might be summed up the love Alice Procter had for Philip Gordon before he succumbed to the sweet charm of Marie Carey.

Not until Alice lost Phil to another woman, did she realize what she missed. The already keen sense of loss was constantly kept alive by the many, and sometimes malicious reminders of so-called friends.

That Alice should meet the Gordons frequently was quite natural, for they belonged to the same social set. She covered up her disappointment very well. No one suspected how passionately she loved Philip Gordon since he was out of her reach.

Gordon's meteoric rise in the business world had made him a power to be reckoned with. He held the controlling interest in one of the largest and most productive copper mines in Montana. It was said of him that he had cornered the market. Therefore some of his friends referred to him as "The Copper King."

His social prominence grew by leaps and bounds. Honors were heaped upon him everywhere, and his lovely wife was usually there to share them with him.

Alice Procter's cup of bitterness became full to overflowing. The climax was reached one night at a dinner given in the honor of the Gordons.

"I think you played the fool, my dear," Mrs. Hendricks, who was seated next to her at the table, said in the course of an animated conversation. "You could have had him, for Phil was quite fond of you."

The sting of the remark put her in a vicious mood. An attempt to appear nonchalant, and even good-natured, failed utterly.

"Oh," Alice rejoined, a smoldering fire in her eyes, "there are other desirable fish to be caught in the social sea."

"But, they are wary, my dear," came back with a snicker.

"They all know the bait you use, and they don't seem to like it. If I were you I'd try something else for a change."

This incident happened some months ago, and Alice Procter had been ready to commit murder right then and there. Was she never to hear the end of this? She knew she could not forget Phil Gordon, for her love had grown into a soul-destroying passion. All the inherent evil in her arose.

And so she set to work with a bold and masterly hand to retrieve what she had lost. She was ruthless in her methods Deceit and treachery had become her choice weapons.

What cared she about the havoc that flashlight picture wrought. The result she awaited anxiously. It came sooner than she expected over the phone.

Mrs. Hendricks called her up the very next day.

"Something must have gone dreadfully wrong at the Gordon home," this dangerous gossip began.

"Why, what's up?" Alice asked innocently.

"Oh, haven't you heard about it yet, Alice?"

"No, what is it?" impatiently.

"Why, it happened so sudden," Mrs. Hendricks went on. "You know, the Gordons and we are neighbors. They had an awful row yesterday. Our servants are friends, you understand That is how I found it out. I am informed that Phil and Marie quarreled bitterly. When she fainted, he sent for a doctor. This morning a specialist arrived. I believe it is brain fever. Isn't it awful?"

Alice Procter smiled devilishly.

"I wonder what they quarreled about?" she said, trying to make her voice sound sympathetic. "They were always such a devoted couple. It is too bad."

"Well, I don't know," replied the other woman. "I must have been something rather serious. As a rule Phil is such a good-natured chap. He never loses his temper. The servants say that he screamed at the top of his voice."

Again Alice Procter smiled that same devilish smile.

"I am very sorry," she purred, "I think I'll drive over and see if I can do anything."

"You won't get in," Mrs. Hendricks said. "All visitors are turned away. I called and was told by a servant that no outsiders

are allowed in the house."

After she hung up the receiver, Alice began pacing the floor. The expression on her face belied any noble impulse. She was alone, and so did not have to hide her emotions. Once or twice she grinned diabolically. Then,. all of a sudden, she burst into an ugly laugh.

The next moment she had Jack Hoover on the phone.

"Trouble is brewing between the Gordons," she told him. "I am going over and find out about it. You better remain in hiding for a week, or run to New York for a while. It's about the flashlight picture."

"I am going to stay right here in Chicago," Hoover answered with a reckless laugh. "If Phil Gordon is looking for me, I'll——"

"Now listen, Jack," Alice interrupted anxiously. "You have promised to help me. There must be no quarrel between Phil Gordon and you—and there will be if you meet. If you get a drubbing, you deserve it. But I won't have you beat him up. I—I couldn't stand it."

"Very well," came back quietly. "I'll do as you say, Alice. But I'll be back in two weeks."

"Yes, I want you to come back. I need you." Miss Procter's voice was urging, almost plaintive. "Stay no longer than two weeks, and when you get back, call me up."

Jack Hoover promised, and that ended the telephone conversation between these two.

Alice Procter dressed and had herself driven to the Gordon residence. The pale-faced servant who came to the door spoke in a whisper.

"Mrs. Gordon is very ill," she said. "I am sorry, but Mr. Gordon has given instructions not to admit any visitors. If you will kindly leave your card or your name, I shall be glad to——"

"But I am a close personal friend," Alice interrupted. "Here is my card. Take it to Mr. Gordon and tell him, please, to see me for just a moment."

Alice was admitted into the hall, where she sank into a chair.

Quite some time elapsed. Then finally Philip Gordon came downstairs. She gasped when she saw him. His handsome face

was haggard, and his eyes were sunken. Her stony heart was moved to pity.

"Why, what has happened, Phil?" she asked.

"My wife—is ill," he replied hoarsely, then paused.

"Yes, so I heard," the visitor murmured as she seized one of his hands. "Oh, Phil, I can not tell you how sorry I feel for you. Is her condition—dangerous?" Her eyes lifted inquisitively.

"No one can tell," he replied, his shoulders sagging. "Even the doctors don't know. Marie has been in a state of feverish delirium since yesterday. Oh, it is frightful, Alice. I am the most miserable man in the wide world to-day."

"But, why?" Alice inquired, slanting a quick look at his quivering lips. "Marie will surely recover, and——"

"Yes—yes," he cut in almost bitterly. "She may recover. But what then?"

"Good heavens, Phil!" the treacherous woman cried. "What has happened? I hope you and Marie have not quarreled seriously."

Philip Gordon pulled himself together.

"I—I would rather not discuss that now," he said resolutely. "I am grateful for your sympathy, Alice. It was kind of you to call. You—you will excuse me now, won't you?"

But Alice Procter did not seem inclined to take this as a dismissal. Tears quickly sprang into her eyes.

"May—may I see the children for a moment before I go?" she said, tender pleading in her voice. "Please, Phil. You know, I love them so. I won't stay but just a minute."

For a moment it appeared that her request would be denied. Finally he acquiesced.

"Of course, you can see them, Alice," he murmured, swallowing hard a few times. "The poor little tots are all broken up. They can not understand why their mother don't come to romp with them as usual. They are down-hearted and sad. Perhaps you can cheer them up a bit."

"Oh, I hope, I can," she said fervently.

As they walked silently up the heavily carpeted stairs, Alice Procter's features contracted sharply. It was like the house of death. Her conscience accused her bitterly, but she set her teeth.

The nursery was not the usual place of childish merriment and happy laughter. Both of the children were huddled in a cor-

ner, trying vainly to become interested in a picture book. Their faithful playmate and guardian, Annie, was in tears.

She rose and stepped aside as Mr. Gordon entered with the visitor.

"Here is Miss Procter," Philip said, making a pitiful attempt at being his usual gay self when in the presence of the children. "Come and shake hands with her, Harry. You, too, Phyllis," he added when the little girl hung back.

The tots obeyed dutifully, but neither of them evinced the least degree of delight.

"Will you let me play with you for a little while?" Alice asked gently. "I'd just love to. You'll let me, won't you?" She turned to Harry.

"No. I want muvver," said the boy, his dark eyes filled with genuine sorrow.

"Yes, me want muvver, too," echoed the little girl, her sweet mouth drooping pathetically.

Philip Gordon restrained the tears with difficulty. His babies cried for their mother hour after hour. And she could not come to them. No, not even if she recovered.

"But won't you let me tell you a nice story?" Alice Procter persisted. "I know the loveliest story about three bears."

Little Harry's eyes were resentful. Phyllis turned away.

It seemed as if some childish instinct had warned them against this coldly beautiful woman. She was not at all like their mother. Alice had failed utterly in beguiling them. And how dared she aspire to win the affection of two innocent children? How could she value such an unblemished gift?

Were they not the flesh and blood of the woman she meant to destroy? And so Alice stood repulsed by the heart of a child, for little Harry said defiantly:

"I don't like you."

Under ordinary circumstances Philip would have made the boy apologize. He was a thorough believer in disciplining his children. But how could he be harsh even in the slightest degree when his heart was near the breaking point.

Alice Procter had turned hastily away. She was far too shrewd an actress to betray what she felt.

"I am so sorry for them," she murmured, then wiped away

an imaginary tear. "I do hope their mother will recover quickly. They need her, Phil. And I am very, very sorry. I had hoped that I might be permitted to give your children a happy hour now and then."

"They have a most devoted nurse in Annie," Philip answered, indicating the silent figure in the back-ground. "However, I am grateful to you, Alice."

Nothing was said as they left the nursery together. Down the stairs Alice Procter walked with her head bowed. She was trying to create the impression that she was in the sway of some powerful emotion. It was true.

But it was not an emotion born of a noble impulse. In that short moment in the nursery she had learned to hate even Marie's innocent children.

"If there is anything I can do, Phil," she said as they stood at the door, "please let me know. You will, won't you," she purred, "for old times' sake? I want you to know that I have always been one of your truest and most loyal friends."

"Thanks," was his response, and closed the door behind her.

Chapter 9

THE TWO SISTERS

EATED in the cozy living room of his big house, Mr. Procter was enjoying his evening smoke. The cigar was tilted at a rakish angle, and there was a smile on his lips. He had just finished reading the evening paper. The stock market quotations vindicated his sound judgment in making investments. The sudden and unexpected rise in General Motors meant that he had made a killing.

But Mr. Procter's obvious good humor was not solely due to his good fortune.

He really did not need the money gained by occasionally dabbling in stocks, for he had retired from active business with enough of this world's goods to keep him and his two daughters in comfort for the rest of their lives.

What brought frequent smiles to his face, was the change in his domestic affairs. Alice had become a different girl. She was no longer the frivolous society butterfly.

There were no more quarrels because she showed a decided inclination to heed his warning advice.

She had ceased going to wild parties, and she smoked no more cigarettes. To all appearances she had completely broken with the fast set.

Quite unexpectedly, Alice seemed to find pleasure in staying home evenings. She and her younger sister played and sang together, while the father listened with a feeling of contentment in his fast aging heart.

"I can't tell you how I enjoy this, girls," he said one night as they finished a beautiful old ballad. "If your mother were still alive," he added, his voice softening perceptibly, "how happy she would be. Before she was taken away from us, she often said that she hoped you two girls would be pals."

"Why, we are pals," Betty cried, throwing her arms impulsively about her father's neck and kissing him. "Alice told me that she is not going anywhere in the future unless I go with her."

Mr. Procter nodded, his face wrinkling into another smile.

"Well, I am glad to hear that," he said. "Now, I don't ex-

Of course Jack Hoover kissed her. And he did not stop there when the young girl lay passively in his arms. And quite suddenly, in a moment of spring madness, Betty saw a flash.

pect you two girls to stay at home with me every night. It won't hurt you to go out occasionally and mix with the young folk. You have given me a good many pleasant evenings. I won't mind being alone now and then."

Alice came over and sat on the arm of her father's chair. But her show of affection lacked sincerity. Her movements were stilted and her words betrayed hidden impatience.

"Betty and I expect to go to the opera or a good show once a week," she declared. "You know, we are rather out of it since I broke with the Madison Country Club crowd. Socially we are dead and buried."

The father patted her shoulder.

"You never did a better thing for yourself in your life," he answered. "And you are not socially dead by any means, Alice. There are a lot of nice young folk in the city. You know plenty of them. Give a party and invite them to come here."

Betty clapped her hands delightedly.

"Oh, let's!" she cried, and kissed her father in a burst of grateful emotion. "You are a brick, dad. I'll tell you what," to her sister, "you invite your best friends, Alice, and I'll invite mine."

"Alright," Alice agreed, but without much enthusiasm.

The following day preparations were begun for the party. Old Mr. Procter went carefully over the list of young people to be invited. He crossed out two names because they were members of the Madison Country Club.

Alice made a wry face, but wisely refrained from making an audible objection.

The party proved to be a tame affair for her. There were no cigarettes for women, no hip flasks, and no telling of risque jokes. There was no boisterous laughter and no dark veranda.

But Alice felt herself very well compensated as she watched her younger sister.

Betty, with her flaming beauty, instantly became popular with the other sex. And she displayed some characteristics that were strangely at odds with her former demureness.

She wore a decollete gown such as Alice had worn to one of the country club dances, and to which her father had so strenuously objected.

"Can you imagine it?" Alice commented to herself with a

feeling of bitterness. "She can get away with anything. That's merely a sample of parental justice. Oh, well, dad will wake up some of these days and find that his dear little Betty had her angel wings singed."

After that party came trips to the opera, shows, and parties in other private homes, where strict propriety was not always observed. Quite naturally Betty looked upon her older sister as her mentor and advisor.

Betty wanted to know what clothes to wear, how to conduct herself in the presence of men, and many other things.

Alice gave that advise freely, and with a definite purpose in view.

By degrees Betty changed—for the worse. She found the first puff at a cigarette quite exhilarating. When she drank the first cocktail at one of the parties, she liked it. And how she warmed under the admiring glances of the young men.

"Watch your step with dad," was Alice's constant warning. "If he ever finds out that you drink and smoke, I'll get the blame."

"Don't you worry, dearie," Betty would answer with a shrug of her pretty shoulders. "What dad don't know won't turn his hair any grayer. What is the good of being alive if you can't have a good time once in a while. There is no harm in a cigarette or a little drink."

As usual, Alice greeted this reckless speech with a smile—a very peculiar smile.

She had her younger sister just about where she wanted her. The seed she had sown was beginning to bear fruit. When Alice had a few moments to herself, she was in touch with Mrs. Hendricks, the tattler—Mrs. Hendricks, the scandal monger.

Conditions at the Gordon home remained unchanged. Marie was still in a delirium, and her recovery was in doubt.

"Poor Philip looks like a shadow," was Mrs. Hendricks latest report. "I feel so sorry for him. I heard that there would be a divorce if his wife ever gets well. I wish I could find out what is at the bottom of it all."

And again Alice smiled, this time a knowing smile.

Matters were progressing nicely in her favor. In the meantime she continued teaching her younger sister all the little tricks and artifices used in fast society. Betty became an apt pupil.

More than once they came home together at an early morning hour, under the influence of drink not sanctioned by the Eighteenth Amendment.

Old Mr. Procter scolded no longer. His confidence in Betty remained unshaken. She could do no wrong.

"She is a level-headed girl," he used to say. "I don't have to worry about anything she does. No danger of her ever besmirching the family honor."

That kind of talk made Alice furious. It made her more pitiless. It made her more determined to disillusion her father about Betty.

Jack Hoover had returned to Chicago, and he again held sway at the Madison Country Club. Alice kept in constant touch with him, and they talked quite a bit as the next club dance approached.

Betty had heard so much about these weekly dances that she decided to attend one of them. The moment she mentioned the fact, Alice vetoed the idea rather vehemently. She had learned that any opposition from her made Betty more determined. Betty became insistent.

"Well, if you must go," she said finally, "I'll do all I can for you, dear. I'll fix it so you won't be a wallflower."

"Aren't you coming with me?" Betty wanted to know.

"I have a date with Tommy Atkinson on that night," Alice replied. "But I'll join you later in the evening, if that will be alright."

"Sure," exclaimed Betty.

"But," Alice warned, "not a word about this to dad. You know how he feels about that crowd."

"Leave it to me, old dear," came back confidently.

"It is really a shame the way dad talks about the Madison Country Club," the older sister went on, assuming an injured air. "There is nothing wrong with it. Every man I know among the members can be trusted. Take Jack Hoover, for instance. You remember how dad raved about him. Jack takes a drink occasionally. They all do. But how he can dance. The girls all fight for him."

Betty reflected, and a smile lingered about her sensitive lips.

"I always liked Mr. Hoover," she said. "He can't be as

bad as daddy thinks. He doesn't look like an adventurer."

"Indeed, he doesn't," Alice seconded heartily. "Now, in case I should fail to come to the dance," she went on in a purring tone, "you come home alone in our car. Don't let anyone come with you."

"I won't," promised Betty.

That disposed of the matter. When the evening of the dance came, both girls left the house together as usual. They were going to a show, they told their father.

"Don't stay out too late," were his last words.

At a safe distance the two girls separated. Betty felt quite grown up as she was driven to the Madison Country Club all by herself. She told the chauffeur to come for her no later than twelve o'clock.

Betty had the time of her young life. She had admirers by the score. And then came the inevitable Jack Hoover. He really danced wonderfully well, and he said so many nice things. They had a few drinks, and with each one Betty grew more reckless.

"Oh, how I enjoy this!" she cried as they danced again. Her cheeks were aflame and he was holding her unnecessarily close.

"So do I," Hoover answered softly.

When at the end of the dance he suggested that they go out on the veranda to smoke a cigarette, Betty acquiesced. But they did not stay on the veranda. They strolled across the wide expanse of lawn in the direction of sheltering trees and hiding shrubbery.

Of course, Jack Hoover kissed her. And he did not stop when the young girl lay passively in his arms. And then, quite suddenly, in a moment of spring madness, Betty saw a flash.

"What was that?" she asked, startled.

"Oh, some fool smoking a loaded cigar," the man answered. "They explode like that."

When Betty Procter returned to the dance floor, she was not quite so sure of herself. She began to watch the door for a sight of her older sister. But midnight came, and no Alice.

When she finally went home alone, she was ashamed—bitterly ashamed.

She found Alice sitting up in her boudoir, expectant.

"I am sorry I had to disappoint you, dear," began Alice. "I

got one of my sudden headaches and came right home after the show. But," she added quickly, "what is the matter? I believe you have been crying."

"Oh," sobbed Betty, as she hid her burning face in her older sister's bosom. "I wish I had not gone to that dance."

"Why, what has happened?" demanded Alice.

"I—I can't tell you," came back amid a veritable storm of sobs.

And then Alice Gordon did a thing utterly out of harmony with the moment. She nodded her head and smiled. Her plan had worked well, thanks to Jack Hoover's willing assistance.

Chapter 10

THE DECIDING HOUR

BOTH PHYSICIANS had left the Gordon home early in the evening and left utter hopelessness behind. There was not a possible chance for Marie Gordon, and they said so. In all probability she would pass away some time during the night. A night lamp, the chosen companion of illness and misery, burned dimly on a little table in the midst of a grim array of medicine bottles.

In an armchair sat Philip Gordon, his head thrown back against the cushions in an attitude of utter exhaustion. But a few weeks ago it would have been impossible to find a happier man in all the wide world. To-night, he was undoubtedly the most miserable man within the girth of the seven seas.

He had been stunned by the final statement of the physicians, although they had warned him to be prepared for the worst. And now fate decreed that the woman who had been a sweet wife and a loving mother, must die.

Philip did not hear the door open. Nor did he notice that anyone had entered the room, until a figure loomed up before him.

"Ah, it is you, Annie," he said in a tired voice, "What is it?"

"The children are ready for bed, Mr. Gordon," she announced. "They want you to come and kiss them good-night."

Philip stifled a groan. Ah, how he dreaded the ordeal this night. Not that he minded kissing them before they went to sleep. He would have to listen to their childish prayer—a prayer which would remain unanswered. Before morning their mother would lay cold in death.

With his feet dragging, he followed Annie into the nursery As they entered, both children were kneeling, and they were saying their prayers.

Little Phyllis was a bit slower than her brother.

"And please, Dod, make my muvver well," she was last to end.

They gazed at their father with big, wondering eyes, as he gathered them both in his arms. It was the first time they saw their daddy weeping. It was a scene to soften a heart of stone

"Take them, Annie, please," Philip begged, and ran from the room.

Once more with his dying wife, he sank in the same arm-chair, allowing his tears to come unchecked.

The days of torture he had passed through, an eternity could not efface. Even now, his heart was torn with conflicting emotions. Even now, with the angel of death hovering near, he wondered if there had ever been anything serious between Marie and Jack Hoover.

"I can't believe it—I won't believe it!" he said to himself again and again.

But there was that flashlight picture. It showed her in the man's arms. That he had kissed her, was obvious. The evidence was damning. And why had Marie lied to him repeatedly and deliberately?

However, there had been moments when not dominated by his fierce jealousy, that he felt inclined to give her the benefit of the doubt. Marie had always been pure and honorable. No breath of calumny had ever touched her. She had never had any secrets from him.

There was not a more loving mother in the whole universe His eyes grew hot as he thought of his two children and the vain prayers. His heart softened and filled with unutterable grief.

"Oh, God," he began to pray, "do not let her die. I love her more than ever before. Do not deprive my children of their mother. Please, oh, merciful God, hear me in this, the darkest hour of my life."

The nurse opened the door cautiously and peered in. She saw Philip Gordon kneeling at the foot of the bed, his face hidden in his hands, and sobbing.

"Oh, it is heartbreaking," she whispered to herself, as she withdrew and began pacing up and down in the hall. "If the doctors could only do something for her. But they have given her up, and that poor man is waiting for the end to come."

The angel of death was indeed hovering near. As if he had heard the rustling of the wings, Philip Gordon rose unsteadily to his feet, and flung out both hands.

"No—no!" he cried, his voice shrill with protest. "It can not be! It must not be. God, be merciful!"

And the angel of death harkened to the call of the master. The wing's rustling receded. But the unhappy man did not know that his prayer had been answered. For almost an hour, it seemed, Marie had quit breathing. Her features were those of one already dead.

"Oh, God, I am her murderer," Philip sobbed. "Why did I lose my head about that picture and threaten divorce without giving her a chance to explain? Marie—Marie, don't leave me without a word, or at least a look of forgiveness."

He kissed those pale lips, tasting the salt of his own tears. Suddenly he started back. What was that?

Had Marie moved, or was his brain playing him a trick? He started and stared. An incredulous gasp broke from his open mouth. The gasp was repeated, and became a hoarse cry.

The nurse ran in, believing that the inevitable had happened. Instead she found Gordon standing at the bed, a fierce light in his eyes, and a hand raised commandingly. She hear his voice. It was strong and resolute.

"Call the doctor, quick!" she heard him say.

With a nod, the nurse flew to the telephone. A few minutes later the doctor arrived in all haste. Philip Gordon could not speak. He pointed to the bed and the quiet figure upon it.

The physician at once examined the patient. To his amazement he found her far from dead.

"I can not understand it," he said to himself. "Why, this is a miracle." Then aloud, he addressed the nurse. "Please call Dr. Van Buren. And tell him to come as quickly as possible."

Dr. Van Buren was the specialist, whose opinion had been firm that Marie Gordon would not live through the night. When he came he found his colleague in a state of excitement. Without a word he also examined Mrs. Gordon.

"This is a most extraordinary case," he commented. "Why, I believe the patient will live."

"Live?" cried Philip, joy leaping into his sunken eyes. "Did you say she will live, doctor? Oh, don't give me any such hope unless you are sure of it. I could not stand——"

"We must not be too sure," the specialist interrupted quietly. "However, there has taken place a decided turn for the better."

The two physicians held a consultation which lasted for several minutes. They agreed that one of them was to remain and watch the patient. It was such an unusual case that Dr. Van Buren insisted on staying.

Then followed a long night of waiting and hoping. At times the patient would rally, then sink again. She was passing through a crisis and when the first rays of the morning sun broke through the windows, Dr. Van Buren announced that, unless unforeseen complications arose, Marie would live.

The glad tidings spread rapidly through the house. It was a little after eight o'clock when Philip Gordon, worn out, but happy, went downstairs to eat breakfast. He smiled wanly as the servants greeted him quite cheerfully.

In the nursery the children were just being dressed. It was a different daddy who came to kiss them this morning. But he did not stay long. He returned to the sickroom and resumed his vigil at the bedside of his wife.

All day Marie battled to hold what little advantage she had gained. During the afternoon she lapsed into a sound sleep.

Dr. Van Buren nodded his satisfaction.

"That is a very good sign," he whispered to Gordon. "It will give her a chance to gain more strength. And," he added, as

he held out his hand, "I think I may congratulate you. There is no longer any doubt about it. Your wife will recover."

Philip wrung the physician's hand, trying vainly to keep back the tears. Speech was impossible.

"And now you begin to take better care of yourself, sir," Dr. Van Buren went on. "You have been under a terrible strain. I suggest that you lose yourself on a farm somewhere for a month or two. What you need is plenty of rest and wholesome food."

"I — I have an estate in the country which I acquired through purchase a few weeks ago," Philip answered, his voice still a little husky. No doubt you have heard of Oak Manor."

"Oh, yes," the doctor assented. "Oak Manor is an ideal place for you. I presume it is to be the summer home for you and your family."

Gordon nodded his head in the affirmative.

"But I'll stay here until my wife is strong enough to accompany me," he declared. "You see, I expect to close up this house for the summer."

"You are a lucky man, Gordon," said Dr. Van Buren. "I hope I may be permitted to spend a day or two at Oak Manor. I understand it is a relic of old English architecture, a tower, underground passages and magnificent gardens."

Philip smiled.

"Indeed, I insist that you come and spend a week at least doctor," he exclaimed heartily.

"Thanks." Dr. Van Buren shook hands once more with Phil, then prepared to leave. He gave the nurse some whispered instructions and left.

After the physician was gone, Phil sat on the edge of the bed and watched his wife. Marie was sleeping quietly. Her breath was deep, and came at regular intervals. And as she slept, a little color came back to her thin face.

Toward evening she opened her eyes. Their expression was rational. The wild look of delirium was missing. She saw a face close to hers.

"Phil—Phil!" she whispered. "Oh, Phil!"

She looked vainly for his smile of forgiveness and a tear slipped from under her lashes.

"Phil!" she cried imploringly. "Phil!"

Continued in next number

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